

## CLEANUP IN THE ALEUTIANS

By Charles Hendricks

**F**ew locations in the United States have endured as dramatic a physical impact from warfare in this century as Alaska's Aleutian Islands. Scene of the only foreign military occupation and land combat in the 50 states during World War II, these islands until recently remained scarred by the after-effects of hasty military construction and rapid post-war demobilization.

The Corps of Engineers has now begun a broad effort to clean up unsightly remnants of World War II on these once pristine islands. At the same time, engineers are collecting artifacts and records that preserve the memory of the area's significant historical events. Alaska's story, although unique, portrays the magnitude of the environmental restoration effort currently confronting the Department of Defense.

In 1940 the United States began to build substantial facilities for naval and land forces at Dutch Harbor, near the eastern end of the

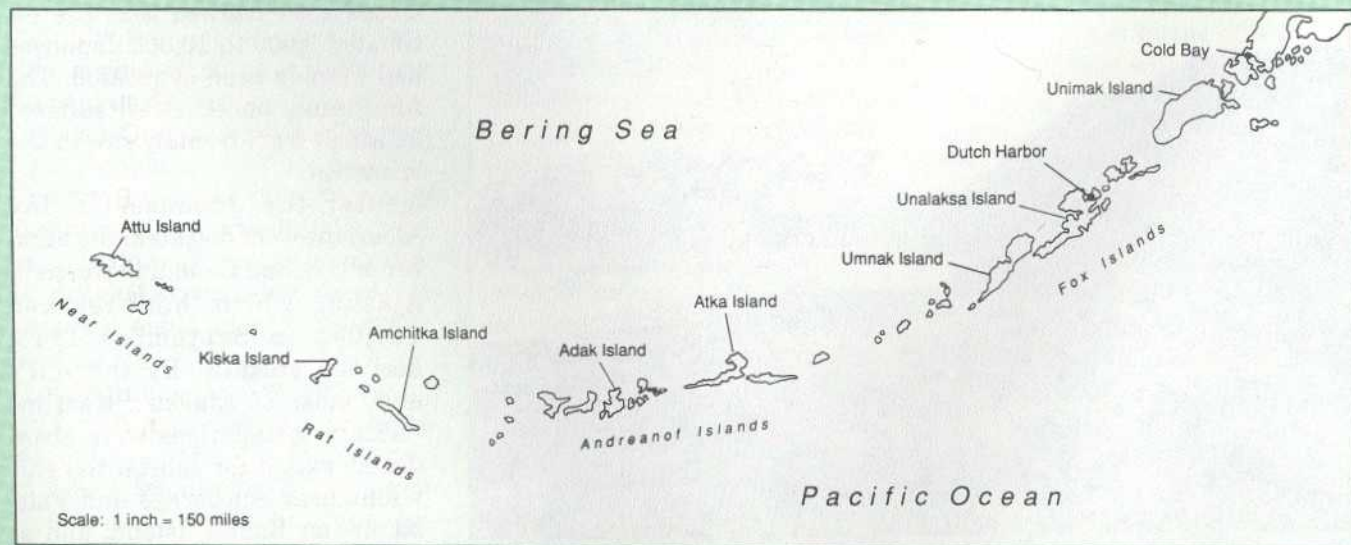
archipelago. These forces were assigned to defend the islands from the threat of Japanese aggression. Unalaska Bay, on which Dutch Harbor was situated, had been the commercial hub of the Aleutian Islands since Russian traders settled there in the 18th century.

Navy contractors and troops, including the first Seabee construction regiment, built a \$44 million operating base at Dutch Harbor during the period 1940-44. It included a seaplane station, submarine base, Marine barracks, and radio facilities. The base had 17 office buildings, a 200-bed hospital, and seven operating docks. Navy builders also erected a typical Army mobilization-type garrison for 10,000 men adjacent to the Navy base. When the build-up of forces made it desirable for Navy personnel to occupy those facilities, Seabees built another Army base on nearby Unalaska Island. Army engineers, meanwhile, built an airfield on Umnak Island, just west of Unalaska Island.

Japanese planes bombed Dutch

Harbor in early June 1942 in an unsuccessful attempt to divert American forces from the critical battle at Midway Island. Attacking aircraft destroyed two Army barracks and four large oil tanks; damaged three quonset huts, a hospital, and a naval radio station; and set the barracks ship *Northwestern* afire. American fighters at Umnak engaged the Japanese planes but lost eight aircraft to the enemy's seven. American ground casualties amounted to 43 killed and 50 wounded.

Immediately after this attack, Japanese seized the undefended islands of Attu and Kiska, in the western Aleutians. At this point, the U.S. Army recognized the serious threat that the Japanese posed to the predominantly Native American population inhabiting the island chain. The Army reacted by hastily evacuating most native Aleuts in the Aleutian and nearby Pribilof Islands to camps in the Alaskan panhandle. The residents of Attu, unfortunately, were interned by the Japanese in Japan.



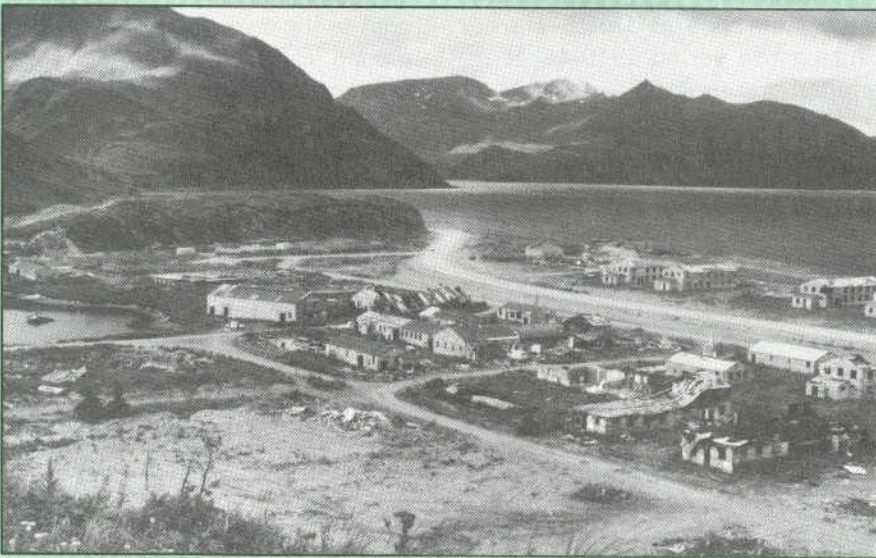
Aleutian Islands



## Dutch Harbor . . .



**During 1942 bombing raid**



**In disrepair**



**After 1985 restoration**

General Simon Bolivar Buckner, commander of the Army's Alaska Defense Command, responded to the Japanese attacks by expanding Army bases on the Alaska Peninsula and pushing his forces westward from island to island in the Aleutians. By January 1943 Buckner's forces, which included U.S. and Canadian troops, had reached Amchitka Island, 80 miles southeast of Kiska. Army engineers quickly constructed airfields on the occupied islands, which enabled American fighters and bombers to launch destructive raids on the Japanese garrisons at Kiska and Attu.

When 11,000 American forces landed on Attu on May 11, 1943, they found 2,400 Japanese well entrenched on the island's rocky heights. The Japanese were in no mood to surrender, and only a combination of intense naval shelling, aerial bombardments, and ground attacks eventually forced them from their mountain-top positions. Before the battle ended 18 days later, the American commander had been relieved, 550 Americans had been killed, and 1,150 had been wounded. Only 29 Japanese were taken prisoner.

The Aleutian campaign came to an anticlimactic end in August 1943, when 34,000 allied troops landed on Kiska. The assault troops soon learned that the estimated 9,000 to 10,000 Japanese had already been evacuated. The Americans, nonetheless, suffered 21 killed from friendly fire in the operation.

After the Japanese in the Aleutians were defeated, the number of U.S. and Canadian troops in Alaska, which had reached 144,000 in September 1943, declined steadily. By the war's end, most of Alaska's wartime military installations were abandoned, except for substantial garrisons near Anchorage and Fairbanks, on Kodiak Island, and at



Adak Island in the Aleutians.

The displaced Aleuts returned to their islands in 1944 and 1945 only to find their homes ransacked or destroyed. The Aleuts' Russian Orthodox churches had been vandalized, and the village on battle-torn Attu had been obliterated. The United States spent \$250,000 after the war rehabilitating the Aleut communities, but the money did not adequately compensate for the damage inflicted by souvenir-hungry troops. Many small Aleut settlements were abandoned. While the federal government built 24 homes on Atka, including six for Attuan families returning from Japan, most Aleuts had to rebuild as best they could on their own. Many found useful building materials at abandoned military facilities.

The Aleutian economy improved significantly in the 1970s, aided by the United States' declaration of a 200-mile domestic fishing zone in 1976. Also, the Native Land Claims Settlement Act of 1971 provided substantial benefits to the Aleut community. In the midst of this prosperity, the continued presence of dilapidated, abandoned military buildings formed an unsightly contrast.

Congress asked the Corps of Engineers to plan the removal of abandoned military buildings in the Aleutian Islands and at the two largest wartime installations on the Alaska Peninsula in a 1974 water resources act. During the next five years, the Corps' Alaska District prepared two inventory and planning documents for the environmental restoration work. It concluded that a respectable cleanup would cost at least \$22 million.

Recognizing the magnitude of the military cleanup problem throughout the United States, Alaska's Senator Ted Stevens proposed, and Congress in December 1983 enacted, legislation creating a Defense Environmental Res-

toration Account. This account contained appropriated funds that could be used only to clean up hazardous wastes and unsafe and unsightly buildings and debris at current and formerly used defense sites.

The Corps' Alaska District moved quickly to clean up Aleutian and Pribilof Island sites. By 1985, the district had awarded contracts totaling \$2.8 million to clean up Dutch Harbor and Unalaska Island, \$4.4 million for environmental restoration at Atka and Amchitka Islands, and \$2.8 million for clean-up work at Cold Bay.

The Corps maintained a lively interest in historic preservation as it undertook the cleanup operations. Joined in its effort by the State of Alaska's Historic Preservation Office and the National Park Service, the Corps carefully documented wartime construction in Alaska and preserved the best surviving structures. Project staff recorded detailed structural information about several historic sites before buildings were razed. These included the Navy's administrative headquarters at Dutch Harbor, the first Marine barracks erected there in 1940, and the air operations building, which later served for 37 years as Dutch Harbor's airline terminal. The group also documented the standard Pacific hut, a lightweight, easily assembled plywood structure similar in design to the steel quonset hut. Pacific huts had proliferated in the Aleutians during the war, proving impervious to the wind and rain for which the islands are renowned.

Cleanup operations were especially extensive on isolated Amchitka and Atka Islands. On Amchitka, the contractor removed 417 frame buildings, more than 1,500 quonset and Pacific huts, 3,300 barrels, 129 tanks, and some

37,000 cubic yards of wood and metal debris. A Corps contractor removed thousands of 55-gallon oil drums and excavated oil-saturated soils from a landfill site used by the military in the Pribilof Islands.

While these cleanup efforts were underway, the National Park Service conducted a survey of wartime sites in the Aleutians. The Park Service's study led to national historic landmark status for the Attu battlefield and Army and Navy airfields on Attu Island, the Japanese occupation site on Kiska Island, Army and Navy bases on Adak Island and at Dutch Harbor, and the Umnak Island airfield. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service now administers the once-occupied Kiska and Attu Islands as part of its Aleutian Islands National Wildlife Refuge.

The initial defense environmental restoration projects in the Aleutians have been completed, but work continues on recently issued contracts. These include a \$7.6 million contract for site restoration at Port Heiden, on the Alaska Peninsula, where an Army base was built after the 1942 bombing raid at Dutch Harbor. Two contracts totaling \$1.7 million have been awarded for additional restoration work at Dutch Harbor and Unalaska Island.

More work is in the offing. The Alaska District will survey the environmental restoration needs of Attu and Kiska Islands this summer, in advance of anticipated work there. These projects, aimed at removing the scars of war from a land of great natural beauty, form a colorful part of the more than \$300 million of defense environmental restoration work which the Corps of Engineers executes annually.

*Charles Hendricks is a historian, Office of History, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Fort Belvoir, VA. He earned a PhD in history from Cornell University.*